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SUBJECT: U.S. Support for Biotechnology Development in Thailand;
Still a Tough Row To Hoe

REF: A) 09 STATE 122732 (Call For FY 2010 Funding Requests); B) 09
BANGKOK 141 (FY 2009 Bangkok Proposal); C) 09 BANGKOK 2551
(Ambassador Meets with Agriculture Minister)

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¶1. Summary and Comment: Agricultural biotechnology is widely accepted by the Thai scientific community, including Thai officials, but NGO and consumer groups continue to oppose biotech crops and foods (also known as genetically modified organisms or GMOs). Given Thailand's importance as the world's number one rice exporter, the USG conducted several capacity building and outreach activities in 2009 to increase awareness and understanding of this technology. Jack Bobo, Senior State Advisor for Biotechnology, met with industry leaders, academicians, and government officials in conferences and private meetings. The USG also funded a Conference on Modern Biotechnology and Risk Communication to teach the skills to communicate with the public to decrease the fear and mistrust of biotechnology.

¶2. While outreach so far has been helpful, Post expects that continued efforts will be needed and climate change concerns could provide a useful way to engage on the issue. Suggested outreach includes engagement with feed and export associations, an event on climate change and the role of agriculture, and meetings with private and public stakeholders to facilitate the development of a biotechnology risk communication strategy. In addition, we should pursue knowledge building events on topics such as GLOBAL GAP, biotechnology with organic agriculture, how to commercialize biotech crops, and regulatory frameworks of biotech crops at international and national levels. Post intends to request funding (in response to Ref A) to continue outreach in 2010 with an event, to be done in collaboration with FAS and USAID food security program office, that will connect biotechnology with Climate Change and Food Security for the Lower Mekong Initiative countries. FAS also has proposed events to build upon the Conference on Modern Biotechnology and Risk Communication held in 2009.

¶3. Thailand is an important country for USG biotech policy not only because of the positive role biotechnology can play in enhancing food security in the region, but because Thailand is generally supportive of U.S. positions in international fora such as the Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity and in various committees of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, an international food safety standard setting body. If Thailand becomes a producer of biotech crops it will be able to play a stronger role in promoting the technology in international meetings.
End Summary and Comment.

Background

¶4. Thailand has a thriving research program in agricultural biotechnology, but there is also a vocal opposition to genetically modified organisms. In 2004, the RTG, under pressure from NGOs,

banned agricultural biotech field trials in the country. The Thai Cabinet revoked its ban on biotech field trials in December 2007, but there have been no approved field trials of agricultural biotech crops. Because of vocal opposition, politicians have been hesitant to push for the use of biotechnology, and stakeholders in the government and private sector report that requirements are restrictive and vague. In addition, the requisite public hearings prior to field trials give anti-biotech NGOs a strong platform.

15. As the world's number one rice exporter and one of the region's top agricultural exporters, Thailand is a key nation for the region's food security and projected increases in the severity of droughts and floods are a major risk. Advances in agricultural technology, including biotechnology, are one possible answer to such threats to food production, but the public needs to accept the technology before it can be fully utilized. For example, insect pests and viral diseases have devastated much of the country's traditional production of papaya and cotton. Thailand's area planted in cotton went from over 150,000 hectares to recently less than 11,200 hectares. A 2007 report done by the Biotechnology Alliance Association (BAA), a Thai biotechnology advocacy group, estimated that Thailand loses US \$3-7 million per year from not allowing genetically modified papaya (based on GM papaya's average yields of 74 tons/hectares against the current 18 tons/hectare derived from non-GM papaya varieties). Biotech cotton would have a similar beneficial economic impact on cotton production in the country.

Outreach by the Senior Advisor for Biotechnology

16. Jack Bobo, Senior State Department Advisor for Biotechnology, visited Thailand from September 24 to October 4. He participated in the "International Conference on Knowledge Management in Agricultural Biotechnology: the Asian Experience," where he

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presented his paper "Addressing Global Challenges: the Role of Agricultural Biotechnology and Implications for Knowledge Management"; moderated an APEC steering committee meeting for the High Level Policy Dialogue on AgBiotech; participated in a roundtable discussion on the topic of biotechnology and its role in food security and global warming; and had meetings with industry leaders, academicians, and government officials involved in the biotech sector in Thailand. Accompanied by FAS officers, Mr. Bobo met with representatives from Pioneer, Monsanto, C.P. Group, Kasetsart University, the National Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, and the Thai Food and Drug Administration. Suggestions for future outreach received by Mr. Bobo during these meetings included events on climate change and the role of agriculture, meetings with private and public stakeholders to facilitate the development of appropriate communication strategies, and engagement with Thailand's feed and export associations.

Modern Biotechnology and Risk Communication Conference

17. The Conference "Modern Biotechnology and Risk Communication" was held on October 5 and 6 in Bangkok. It was organized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Department of State (using DOS/EEB outreach funds), Asia BioBusiness, Thailand's National Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (BIOTEC), and the Food Science and Technology Association of Thailand (FOSTAT). Ambassador Eric John and Darunee Edwards, President of FOSTAT, opened the conference. They emphasized the important role of agriculture biotechnology in enhancing agriculture production and food security. DOS/ECA speaker program participant Dr. James Maryanski then discussed standards for food safety assessment and basic principles of communicating with the public. Dr. Andrew Powell of Asia BioBusiness and Dr. Marichel Navarro of the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) gave presentations as well.

18. Following the speakers, a risk communication workshop presented basic elements of risk communication and how these elements could be applied to communicate with the public about biotech foods. The

workshop included interactive exercises for participants to develop an understanding of and apply principles of risk communication in different circumstances. Attendees provided very positive feedback and suggested topics for future events - to include GLOBAL GAP, biotechnology with organic agriculture, how to commercialize GM crops, and regulatory frameworks of biotech crops at international and national levels. Media coverage of the event was straightforward and without negative commentary.

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